

# Revisiting Behavioral Integrity: Progress and New Directions After 20 Years

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

Behavioral integrity (BI) describes the extent to which an observer believes that an actor's words tend to align with their actions. It considers whether the actor is seen as keeping promises and enacting the same values they espouse. Although the construct of BI was introduced in 1999 and developed more fully in 2002, it builds on the work of earlier scholars that discussed related notions of hypocrisy, credibility, and gaps between espousal and enactment. Since the 2002 paper, a growing literature has established the BI construct, largely but not exclusively in the leadership realm, as a critical antecedent to positive attitudes such as trust and commitment, positive behaviors such as turnover and performance, and as a moderator of the effectiveness of leadership initiatives. BI is by definition subjectively assessed, and perceptions of BI are susceptible to various forms of perceptual biases. A variety of factors appear to affect whether observers interpret a particular word-action alignment or gap as an indication of the actor's high or low BI. In this article, we examine and synthesize this literature and suggest directions for future research. We discuss the early history of BI research and then examine contemporary research at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis. We assess what we have learned and what methodological challenges and theoretical questions remain to be addressed. We hope in this way to stimulate further research on this consequential construct.

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## INTRODUCTION

As the rate of technological and social change accelerates, managing uncertainty plays an important role in organizational life. We live in cynical times, and the public record is replete with examples of political and corporate leaders, as well as corporations themselves—rightly or wrongly—being seen as acting in ways that diverge from their espousals. For instance, many leaders have made proclamations about valuing employees while laying many off in response to economic challenges, and the opposing positions of US political parties regarding the definition and enactment of election integrity leave swaths of the US population deeply mistrusting on both sides. As leaders increasingly must ask followers to embrace change and adopt new procedures and technologies in response to environmental changes, the question of leader credibility looms large.

Behavioral integrity (BI) is an observer's perception of the extent to which an actor's words and actions do or do not align, and it is an ascribed trait: Does the actor enact the same values they espouse, and, more concretely, do they keep their promises (Simons 2002)? For an actor to be perceived as lacking BI, observed word-action gaps must be attributed to them (i.e., internal attribution). Scholars sometimes misuse the BI term to refer to an actor's actual word-action alignment or misalignment: Actual alignment or misalignment forms a central antecedent to BI, which is by definition subjectively assessed in the eye of an observer. By incorporating observatory and interpretative processes as part of the construct itself, the BI construct avoids some of the ambiguity and/or controversy that surrounds constructs like authenticity.

By definition, BI differs from lay conceptualizations of integrity in that the values that an actor espouses or enacts need not be inherently virtuous; it is the alignment of espousals and enactments, irrespective of their content, that is evaluated by the perceiver. A selfish or racist actor who represents themselves accurately might show BI without being virtuous or trustworthy—BI theory would argue that this person is easier to work with than the more commonly encountered selfish or racist actor who represents themselves as altruistic or egalitarian. As specified in the 2002 construct-defining paper, BI can be conceived as a global trait or as value-specific (e.g., BI for Safety, as used by Halbesleben et al. 2013). Furthermore, BI can be ascribed to a leader, as the great majority of empirical research has done, but it can also be ascribed to a collective such as “management around here,” “my team,” or “this organization.”

Even prior to the introduction of the BI construct, scholars noted that gaps between espousals and enactments are problematic. Argyris & Schon (1974) proposed that people hold implicit theories of action and governing values-in-use that drive their decisions and actions, which are distinct from their espoused theories and governing values, or the theories and values they think drive their actions. Argyris and colleagues assert that most people are unaware of their true values and theories of action, or of the gap between their enacted theories and values and those they espouse. They propose models and processes to help leaders surface and reconcile the two, which in turn enables learning. Kerr (1975) similarly highlighted the way policies and procedures often incent behaviors that differ from those leaders hope to promote. Kerr pointed out the prevalence of incentive systems that inadvertently reward behaviors that differ widely from those that are espoused as the intended goal, and that this gap accounts for problematic work behavior. Neither of these early conceptual treatments addressed the attitudinal consequences to followers of these mismatches, only the implications for learning, rational decision making, and action. Furthermore, both emphasized actual inconsistency between espousal and enactment, rather than an observer's perception of a pattern of inconsistency. Actual inconsistency is a primary antecedent to BI, which is the trait an observer ascribes based on a perceived pattern.

These differences between early considerations and BI theory are critical: BI research has demonstrated that the attitudinal consequences to followers of leader or organizational

word-action mismatches are substantial and highly consequential. As discussed in a meta-analytic review (Simons et al. 2015), they have been well demonstrated to affect follower loyalty, satisfaction, trust, cynicism, commitment, and other attitudes, with downstream behavioral and performance consequences. Furthermore, the introduction of the observer into the interpretation of word-action gaps as indicative of the actor's BI enables empirical examination of social, cognitive, and cultural factors that explain how some word-action gaps matter profoundly and some do not (as explored by Effron et al. 2018). For example, observers from higher power distance cultures like India have been shown to revise BI assessments when a subordinate fails to keep a promise, but far less so when the actor is their boss—whereas the reverse is true of observers in cultures characterized by low power distance, such as the United States (Friedman et al. 2018). A second consequence of acknowledging the subjective determination of BI itself is that it facilitates empirical research, as surveying respondents is a reasonable measure of the subjectively determined construct but is less precise in estimating the “objective” alignment between all the actor's words and all their actions.

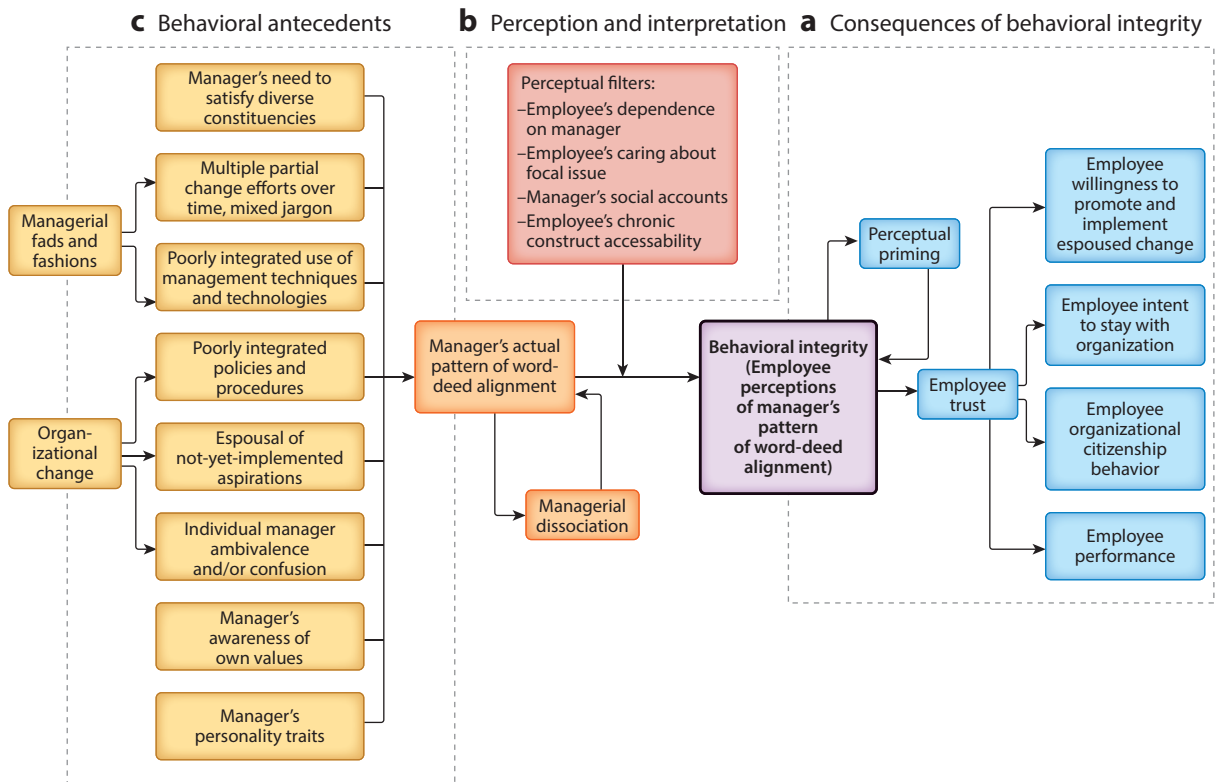
Versions of the BI construct appear as subcomponents and subscales of larger constructs and construct measures: It is a subscale in Walumbwa et al.'s (2007) authentic leadership scale (internalized moral component), it appears in Whitener et al.'s (1998) trustworthiness and Badrinarayanan et al.'s (2020) leadership worthiness constructs, and it is entailed in ethical leadership as defined by Brown & Treviño (2006) as being a moral person and a moral manager. These construct overlaps represent potential pitfalls for research examining the association among these constructs, given the inherent tautology; however, where subscales are reliable as separate indicators of BI, they also represent opportunities for reanalysis of data originally collected for other purposes.

## STRUCTURE AND METHOD OF REVIEW

Although Simons (1999) defined the BI construct and argued that the credibility and trust that followed from it were necessary for effective transformational leadership, he later proposed a model that situated BI within a full network of antecedents and consequences (Simons 2002). That model, which is repeated here in **Figure 1**, will serve as a framework for reviewing the empirical research on BI to date. In this article, we discuss which links in the initially proposed model have received substantial empirical support, which have received only indirect or tentative single study support, and which have been unsupported or unstudied. Furthermore, we discuss ways in which current thinking and research point toward changes to the model. Finally, we discuss ways in which the BI construct itself might need to evolve.

To assess the current state of BI research, we searched the ABI/Informs and Business Source Complete databases for scholarly articles containing “behavioral integrity.” These searches resulted in 420 hits on ABI/Informs, and 59 on Business Source Complete. The large discrepancy between the two was due to ABI/Informs's inclusion of paper bibliographies as part of the search; so many of those 420 results were not relevant. In addition, to capture British spellings we searched the term “behavioural integrity” and found nine additional results on Business Source Complete. We did not consider conference proceedings. We also drew on directly relevant review papers.

Most BI research entails field survey research and/or laboratory studies. Field survey research typically applies a version of the Simons et al. (2007) BI scale, which has subscales for promissory and espoused/enacted values breach, or the Moorman et al. (2012, 2013) perceived leader integrity scale, which has subscales for BI and moral integrity. Although some field research suffers common method bias, the most rigorous studies offset this bias by examining data from multiple sources in their chain of inference, and/or by using aggregation, multilevel analysis, time-lags, or true longitudinal repeated measures data. A few field studies repurpose other scales and purport to assess BI, but where words like “fairness” appear in the scale items alongside “honesty,” they measure a



**Figure 1**

Conceptual diagram of (c) antecedents, (b) perception and interpretation, and (a) consequences of behavioral integrity. Figure adapted from Simons (2002) with permission from The Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS) conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

combination of behavioral and moral integrity. Laboratory experiments typically ask respondents to read vignettes wherein different forms of promises are broken or kept by different actors, but in a few, experimenters have actually broken promises to experimental subjects, albeit temporarily (e.g., Vogelgesang et al. 2021 temporarily refused to provide experimental subjects with promised course credit). A few studies at the company level of analysis have proposed and drawn on archival indicators of BI which, if they stand up to further scrutiny, present significant untapped opportunity.

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Our review revealed that the consequences of BI, depicted in **Figure 1a**, have been well supported. Assessments of leader BI clearly affect follower intent to remain, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), performance, and willingness to implement policy, along with a few other consequences. Although trust (specifically, cognitive trust) appears often to mediate these consequences, there is significant evidence of one or more additional mediating pathways. However, these alternative mediating pathways have thus far been addressed idiosyncratically and need to be systematized. There is evidence that many BI consequences apply at multiple levels of analysis in that different referents for BI and different aggregation levels for BI perceptions have been linked

to employee performance, manager performance, team performance, and company performance. The original model's notion of perceptual priming (whereby perceptions of a target's high or low BI influence later perceptions, thereby creating momentum or an accelerating loop) has received relatively little attention; there is some evidence that it plays a more complex role than simply accelerating later perceptions (Vogelgesang et al. 2021). An additional view of the consequences of BI wherein BI is examined as a moderator of another variable's impact, or is moderated in turn, has begun to emerge. These relationships are promising in part because of the variety of underlying mechanisms proposed. **Figure 1b**, which describes the perception and interpretation process given a target's actual alignment or misalignment, has also been largely supported, although the data on these moderators come from several single studies and are thus less conclusive. Compared to research on the consequences of, and interpretative processes involved in, BI, research on the antecedents of actual word-action misalignment—depicted in **Figure 1c**—remains scarce.

In addition to needed incremental validation and refinement of the initially proposed BI model and its mediators, we suggest several future research directions. First, the nature and function of BI at the group and organizational levels of analysis, and the interplay between the levels, warrant articulation and examination. A second potential direction is the consideration of data beyond word-action alignment as antecedent to BI assessment. Alignment among utterances and among actions is likely important to consider, as is the possibility that culture-driven or otherwise instantiated expectations an observer has of the target may influence perceptions of BI. In other words, it seems likely that judgments of another person's BI are not simply based on that person's history of promise-keeping or enactment of espoused values. There is emerging evidence that the observer may also consider the internal consistency among utterances and among actions and that all of these perceptions are filtered and interpreted through observers' self-systems (Mischel & Shoda 1995). Furthermore, psychological contracts research (e.g., Robinson 1996) suggests that observers might consider a target to be violating BI when that target is simply failing to meet their expectations—even when those expectations have no basis in the actual words or actions of the target. In practice, subjective assessment of another's word-action alignment is based on more than mere word-action alignment. Given the consequence of that assessment, figuring out the antecedents is a worthwhile endeavor.

## CONSEQUENCES OF BEHAVIORAL INTEGRITY

**Figure 1a**, the initially proposed conceptual model for BI, describes consequences of the construct. It proposes that BI's impact on behavior and performance will be mediated by trust and will ultimately drive program implementation, employee retention, OCB, and performance. Empirical studies at various levels of analysis and in multiple industries and countries have repeatedly provided support for all of these consequences but also suggest more complex mediating mechanisms than were initially proposed. According to the figure, BI perceptions are also proposed to accelerate with time through a process of perceptual priming, as observer expectations of high or low BI drive confirmatory perceptual bias. This proposition has only received tentative support (Vogelgesang et al. 2021).

Simons et al. (2015) performed a meta-analysis of 35 independent samples drawn from 21 papers to consider BI consequences. They reported a very strong mean association between BI and trust ( $r = 0.69$ ;  $N = 12,307$  across 22 samples), affective commitment ( $r = 0.51$ ;  $N = 10,488$  across 9 samples), follower OCB ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $N = 2,636$  across 8 samples), and follower in-role performance ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $N = 3,609$  across 15 samples). The meta-analysis further showed evidence that trust and commitment only partially mediate the impact of BI on OCB and performance. Although the mediating mechanisms through which BI affects behavior and performance have not been definitively identified, additional research sheds further light on the issue.

## Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Mediators of Behavioral Integrity Impact

Tomlinson et al. (2020) offer an elaborated view of trust as a mediator of BI's consequences. They apply McAllister's (1995) distinction between affect-based trust and cognition-based trust, which essentially reflect assessments of interpersonal caring and reliability, respectively. They first asked respondents to describe the ability, benevolence, BI, and value congruence of their immediate managers. A week later, they sent a second survey that asked respondents to rate their affective and cognitive trust in those same managers. In two samples of 139 and 202 US workers, they found that affective trust was associated with the perceived benevolence and value congruence of managers but not with perceptions of managers' ability or BI. Cognitive trust, in contrast, was associated with perceptions of managers' BI and ability but not value congruence or benevolence. Moorman et al. (2018) similarly found in an MTurk sample of 251 US workers that leader BI was associated with willingness to rely on the leader, but not with willingness to disclose sensitive information to the leader. Both of these studies used Gillespie's (2012) trust measure, as they reported other available scales confounded antecedents to trust with trust itself. These recent studies suggest that the trust construct can usefully be divided, and that the primary form of trust through which BI operates is cognitive or calculative trust (McAllister 1995).

However, trust and associated attitudes like affective commitment seem not to fully explain or mediate the impact of BI. We propose that a secondary path of impact flows through the informational content that is more clearly communicated by congruent rather than mixed espousals and behavioral indicators. Halbesleben et al. (2013) studied the impact of facet-specific BI related to safety on occupational injuries in a longitudinal study of 658 nurses at four acute-care US hospitals. They found that BI affected the reporting, severity, and frequency of injuries and that the effect was mediated in parallel by both psychological safety and safety compliance. Similarly, Leroy et al. (2012) surveyed 580 nurses and their 54 head nurses on 54 teams at four Belgian hospitals. They studied the impact of BI for safety at the team level on reported treatment errors and found strong links that were mediated by both psychological safety and team priority for safety. Fritz et al. (2013) found that cynicism mediated the impact of BI on commitment but that the impact of BI on follower compliance with expectations was not similarly mediated. Likewise, Simons et al. (2018) found in a study of 6,800 employee surveys at 76 US hotels that a causal chain from BI through trust and commitment accounted for only a small portion of the association between employee reports of their supervisors' BI and the lagged profitability of the enterprise. Trust and similar attitudes clearly do not fully account for the impact of BI on behavior and performance. We think a second mediating pathway of impact, supported by unpublished data and by common themes across idiosyncratic mediators, is the communication clarity afforded by high BI (versus ambiguity introduced by low BI). This pathway is particularly interesting because it lifts the BI out of the realm of morality and relationships and into the realm of more practical performance-oriented leadership. We assert that leader BI sends clear, unmistakable signals of what is expected from followers, and this clarity elicits more of the desired behavior. This reasoning is echoed in research on HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff 2004), which highlights the need for systems to send clear and consistent signals of what is expected from employees; strong climates, or shared perceptions about the behaviors that are valued and rewarded, emerge to the extent that messages are consistent across practices and in the way they are enacted by managers. Nishii and colleagues (Nishii et al. 2018, Nishii & Wright 2008, Wright & Nishii 2013) highlight the specific importance of the alignment of espoused and enacted practices and how employees' perceptions of this alignment shape their assessments of what is actually valued by the organization and expected of employees.

## Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Implementation Effectiveness

The first BI outcome proposed in **Figure 1a** is employee willingness to promote and implement espoused change, which may fruitfully be summarized as implementation. BI appears to play an integral role in the effective implementation of most initiatives, whether it be an espoused focus on safety, diversity and inclusion, or quality. For instance, Guchait et al. (2016a) found in a survey of 255 food service professionals that leader BI for food safety was negatively associated with the frequency and severity of reported food safety violations. Halbesleben et al. (2013) found in a study of 658 registered nurses at four acute-care hospitals that nurse managers' BI for safety was associated with the frequency, severity, and reporting of occupational injuries. Leroy et al. (2012) found in a survey of 580 nurses at four Belgian hospitals that nurse managers' BI for safety was associated with reduced treatment errors. Safety follows from managers' consistent pattern of aligned espousal and enactment of safety protocols.

Implementation of diversity initiatives appears to rely on BI as well. Windscheid et al. (2016) performed three vignette-based laboratory studies that exposed participants to a hypothetical company's positive diversity statement or a neutral statement, combined with a photograph of a gender-diverse or all-male corporate board. Unsurprisingly, the companies with a positive diversity statement and a diverse board were rated as having higher BI and as being more attractive as employers. Companies who offered no such diversity statement but had a diverse board were also rated as being relatively high in BI, likely because of the present ubiquity of diversity statements and the implication that their existence may reasonably be inferred. Lindsey et al. (2017) combined three large-scale time-lagged surveys, including a sample of 60,602 British hospital workers and 1,575 and 330 US workers, which demonstrated that the ethnic representativeness of management affects worker perceptions of harassment, bullying, and abuse and that this impact is mediated by BI. Unfortunately, the use of existing surveys meant that the BI measure included some aspects of moral integrity. Although a survey scale that focused only on word-action alignment would have provided firmer conceptual support and could well have yielded stronger results, a scale that focused on word-action alignment for diversity would likely have yielded still stronger results.

Effective implementation of quality initiatives also seems to be dependent on leader BI. Ismail et al. (2011) surveyed 100 Pakistani hospital middle managers and found that leader espousal of TQM philosophy led to successful TQM implementation only when combined with (or moderated by) leader BI. Swain et al. (2018) used data from key informants at 212 companies that had adopted Six Sigma and showed that leader BI predicts Six Sigma performance and that this relationship is mediated by worker trust and engagement. Although it is still possible that the association between BI and successful implementation is an artifact of reverse causal inference, it seems more likely that the congruent messages leaders send through different modalities cause followers to better understand program initiatives and to attempt to emulate their leaders. As Eisenkopf (2020) demonstrated in a series of laboratory experiments about investment decisions, followers are far more likely to enact leader recommendations that are role modeled or enacted by leaders themselves. The relevance of this emulation pattern for any organizational program or policy implementation can hardly be overstated.

## Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Turnover

Whereas studies of specific implementation efforts typically use BI specific to that effort, studies of broader outcomes tend to use general BI. Only a few studies have examined the association between leader BI and employee turnover, but they show a consistent pattern of results. Hinkin & Schriesheim (2015) surveyed 456 workers at 15 restaurants in the Northeastern United States and found that the consistent use of contingent reward and punishment drives BI perceptions, which in



turn are associated with higher commitment and lower turnover intentions. Badrinarayanan et al. (2020) incorporated BI, along with charisma and competence, into a larger construct of leadership worthiness. They surveyed 271 business-to-business salespeople and found that leadership worthiness is associated with follower turnover intentions, mediated by trust and identification with the manager. Simons et al. (2018) surveyed 6,800 workers from 76 hotels and found at the hotel level that supervisor BI was associated with employee turnover through the mediation of trust and commitment.

### **Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Organizational Citizenship Behavior**

The third BI outcome proposed in **Figure 1a**, OCB, has also been well supported across multiple studies. Prottas & Nummelin (2018) surveyed 3,605 healthcare employees at 10 Mid-Atlantic US hospitals in a religiously affiliated system and found employee assessments of leader BI to be associated with coworker OCB and service quality and further found these associations were partially mediated by worker engagement. Simons et al. (2018) similarly found in their survey of 6,800 hotel workers that aggregated assessments of supervisory BI were associated with discretionary service behavior, a form of OCB, and hotel guest satisfaction scores, again mediated by trust and commitment. Two additional studies provide further evidence of links between BI and OCB and also reveal that BI attached to different referents has different impacts. Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence (2012) surveyed 412 Indian petroleum company employees and found that employees' assessments of their immediate supervisor's BI was associated with OCB, mediated by trust in that supervisor. Their assessments of senior management BI, however, were associated with organizational commitment (mediated by trust in senior management) but not with OCB. Ete et al. (2021) published a set of two lab studies and one field study involving 282 UK firefighters and staff. They found that organizational BI drove organization-oriented OCB through the mediation of identification with the organization. They also found that both leader BI and organizational BI contributed to follower BI, mediated by identification with the leader. This latter finding replicates and elaborates the BI trickle-down effect that Simons et al. (2007) described. BI appears to be well linked to OCB, although there remains some ambiguity about which forms of OCB are primarily driven by supervisory BI and which are driven by organizational or senior management BI.

### **Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Performance**

The fourth and final BI outcome proposed in **Figure 1a** is arguably the most important of all: performance. BI has demonstrated positive impact on follower, leader, team, and organizational performance. We review research on these different forms of performance in sequence.

Choi et al. (2020) surveyed 209 Korean employee–manager dyads and found that employee assessments of their leader's BI were associated with managers' assessments of employees' in-role performance, especially under conditions of high job autonomy, presumably because BI is more strongly predictive of discretionary than prescribed behavior. Furthermore, they found that this association was mediated by employee perceptions of coworker support. Because BI predicts OCB as described above, one part of which is citizenship behaviors directed at helping coworkers, leader BI makes it more likely for followers to experience coworker support. The authors reasoned that under conditions of high job autonomy, followers are more likely to seek out and leverage help from coworkers to improve their performance. This unusual mediator of coworker support warrants additional examination, as it suggests an impact of leader BI on workplace climate or behavioral norms (compare with Nishii & Leroy 2020). The idea here is that when leader BI is



high, followers receive consistent messages about what the leader values and what is expected of them, making it easier for coworkers to coordinate their behaviors.

Indeed, BI plays an essential role in linking a leader's vision to desired employee behaviors. As Simons (1999) argued, in order for followers to identify with and be positively influenced by a leader's vision, they need to see that vision embodied in the leader's daily behaviors—in other words, perceive leader BI. Consistent with this idea, Saleem et al. (2019) surveyed 532 Pakistani bank officers and executives and found that BI mediated the performance impact of both transformational leadership and empowerment. Leroy et al. (2012) surveyed 345 employees and their 49 team leaders at 25 Belgian organizations. They found that authentic leadership is an antecedent of BI, which in turn is associated with employee performance mediated by commitment.

There is also evidence that suggests that leader BI predicts employee performance by facilitating a leader-follower relationship characterized by mutual trust. Palanski & Yammarino (2011) offered an intriguing set of an online laboratory experiment and two multisource field studies. The first field study, including 83 nurses, their managers, and their direct reports, found that leader BI was associated with follower performance, mediated by follower trust in their leader. The second field study, including 149 students in 36 teams, again showed an association between leader BI and follower job performance but offered a far more complex mediating mechanism: As seen before, the association between BI and follower performance is mediated by follower trust in the leader and satisfaction. However, Palanski & Yammarino (2011) also found an additional pathway: Leader BI drives follower BI, which in turn affects leader trust in and satisfaction with the follower, and both of these attitudes also affect follower job performance. Thus, this study suggests the impact of BI on follower performance functions through not only the mediation of employee attitudes (i.e., trust, satisfaction) but also follower emulation of leaders (i.e., trickle-down BI) and the resulting attitudes that leaders have about their followers.

A few studies have used multi-informant data sets to examine the impact of leader BI on the performance of not only their followers but also leaders themselves. Way et al. (2018) surveyed 78 sets of middle managers, their direct subordinates, and their direct superior at 18 Chinese hotels. They expected and found that middle managers' capacity to demonstrate BI is influenced by the extent to which they believe the organization supports their efforts, measured in terms of their perceptions of organizational support. In turn, middle managers' BI makes it more likely that they elicit desired discretionary OCB on the part of their followers. The better their followers' performance, the more the middle managers' superiors rate them as effectively performing their roles as managers. Palanski et al. (2015) combined an online vignette study with a similarly elaborate multisource data set of 475 managers, their reports, peers, and bosses. They found that direct reports' perceptions of manager BI were associated with peer ratings of that manager's behavioral courage, which in turn were associated with superiors' ratings of executive image and performance, and that this pathway of impact was fully mediated. Both of these studies provide persuasive initial evidence of BI's positive performance impact for managers themselves; research that further unpacks the complex processes involved would be valuable.

To date, there is limited research on the relationship between BI and collective performance. In a study of team performance, Palanski et al. (2011) shifted the referent of BI from the leader to the team. In a laboratory study of 36 temporary student teams and a field study with 83 nurses in 18 ongoing teams, they assessed how team members view the overall BI of their teammates, or team BI. They found that team transparency led to team BI, which in turn led to team trust, which drives higher team performance. They found stronger links in their long-term teams than in the temporary teams. The application of BI as a team-level climate construct offers interesting potential for both practice and research but has received little additional attention.

Tests of the association between BI and organization-level performance have demanded either very large-scale surveys or innovative measures. Simons et al. (2018) surveyed 6,800 workers at 76 same-branded hotels and aggregated employee surveys to the hotel level of analysis. They found a substantial association between BI and lagged year-over-year changes in profitability that were only partially mediated by employees' trust, commitment, and OCB. Mavis et al. (2019) coined the phrase "strategic integrity" to describe the alignment between strategic communications and strategic actions. They performed an event study of 80 coded acquisitions by the German pharmaceutical company Bayer and found that stock prices responded with abnormally favorable or unfavorable returns to aligned or misaligned actions, respectively. Dikolli et al. (2020) took an unusual approach to measuring BI in the top-ranked disciplinary journal *Accounting Review*. They inferred that low word-action alignment necessitated more explanations for behavior, and so used the "proportion of causation words in [30,000] CEO annual shareholder letters" as an indicator of BI (Dikolli et al. 2020, p. 66). After controlling for company attributes, they found that the higher this proportion (indicating lower BI), the higher the subsequent audit fees and the lower the subsequent stock performance as measured by Tobin's Q. Although the link between BI and causation words seems indirect, it warrants additional consideration as it constitutes readily available archival data.

### **Behavioral Integrity Consequences: New Discoveries**

Our review revealed that BI has also been linked to a few outcomes that were not described in the initial construct defining model. Erkutlu & Chafra (2019) surveyed 913 nurses from 13 university hospitals in Turkey and found that leader BI was associated with employee silence or voice, mediated by employees' relational identification with their leader. They found this relationship between BI and voice to be stronger when employees' political skill level was weak. Elsetouhi et al. (2018) surveyed 500 line employees at Egyptian travel agencies and similarly found BI to be associated with employee voice, only this time through the mediation of perceived empowering behaviors by the leader. Peng & Wei (2020) surveyed 408 Chinese employees and similarly found an association between the BI and employee voice. Peng & Wei (2018) further surveyed 716 Chinese employees and their 237 managers and found that leader BI predicted manager-assessed employee creativity. The higher the leader BI, the more followers feel their leader's behavior and reactions will be consistent; this added sense of security makes voicing behavior more likely (Elsetouhi et al. 2018, Erkutlu & Chafra 2019, Peng & Wei 2020). Given the association of leader BI and follower voice, and the role of voicing ideas in the generation of creative solutions, it is no wonder that leader BI predicts manager assessed employee creativity (Ayaburi & Treku 2020). Another consequence is suggested by Gatling et al. (2017), who found, in a study of 149 US students in 24 teams, that leader BI reduced deviance behavior, with the effect mediated by trust. Guchait et al. (2016b) found, in a study of 369 Turkish hotel employees and 33 department managers, that BI was associated with superior error recovery performance, with the effect mediated by job satisfaction.

### **Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Priming**

The final element in **Figure 1a** is a proposed accelerating loop for BI perceptions based on the phenomenon of perceptual priming, whereby high or low BI perceptions trigger confirmatory perceptual bias and thus build momentum. Vogelgesang et al. (2021) combined a longitudinal survey of 108 US workers and a laboratory study of 154 undergraduate business students to examine whether trust velocity—the extent to which trust is rising or falling in a moment—influences BI perceptions. They found that it does and that this association is moderated by informational justice. Notably, this study reverses the well-studied assertion that BI drives trust to suggest that

trust also shapes BI perception. In other words, the more an observer trusts the actor, the more likely they are to give the actor the benefit of the doubt. Although any single study must of course be interpreted as tentative, this one provides preliminary support for the proposed accelerating loop.

### **Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Moderated Effects**

Although the initial theoretical model of BI did not include potential moderators of BI's consequences, our review surfaced a variety of studies that have examined the interaction of BI and other variables. The reasons proposed for such interaction effects vary widely, and the relative lack of replication among them represents additional research potential. The range of moderated BI consequences is intriguing from a theory development standpoint. The four primary mechanisms for this moderation appear to be the (a) addition of value content to BI in determining its attitudinal impact on followers, (b) implication that policy espousal absent BI does not result in effective implementation, (c) possibility that justice mechanisms may substitute for leaders' lack of BI, and (d) broad notion that BI can attenuate the negative consequences of leadership styles that might otherwise prove toxic.

Two studies have emphasized the addition of values in forming the impact of BI. Tomlinson et al. (2014) surveyed 127 students and 254 university employees and found that the impact of BI on OCB is moderated by value congruence—in other words, the gap between my boss's espoused and enacted values matters especially when I care about those particular values. Peng & Wei (2020) found that the impact of leader BI on voice is partially moderated by the level to which the leader emphasizes ethical values. Again, BI means more when paired with values.

The second mechanism through which BI has been found to moderate outcomes relates to program or policy implementation. Usman et al. (2021) surveyed 236 Pakistani healthcare workers in a two-wave lagged design. They found that BI moderated the impact of participative leadership on follower OCB and thriving. When bosses request decision input with the sole intention of building buy-in rather than informing their decision making, the desired impact on follower behavior is weakened because employees recognize the word-action gap. Similarly, Paustian-Underdahl & Halbesleben (2014) performed a time-lagged survey of 628 healthcare employees and found that the effectiveness of supervisory work-family guidance in managing employees' work interference with family depends on the supervisor's level of work-family BI: Does the supervisor provide active assistance beyond espousal, and do they themselves model the desired work-life balance? In other words, this study is an issue-specific application of Dineen et al.'s (2006) earlier finding that supervisory guidance only boosts follower OCB when paired with supervisor BI: Supervisors have more positive influence when they are credible, particularly when predicting discretionary behavior. These findings echo conclusions that have been drawn in diversity research, both with regard to employee reactions to diversity practices being influenced by the consistency with which those practices are reinforced by other cues [e.g., other practices, organizational demography, managerial support behaviors (Nishii et al. 2018)] and by climate strength. Strong climates emerge when the consistency of a manager's behavioral role modeling of a strategic value (e.g., inclusion, safety) and reactions to followers' behaviors as they relate to the strategic value align with the manager's espousals about the importance of the value (Nishii & Leroy 2020, Zohar & Luria 2004).

Another category of BI moderated effects considers circumstances and employee characteristics that render BI especially impactful. Kang et al. (2017) surveyed 480 registered nurses at 34 nursing units in a large South Korean hospital. They found that nurse leaders' BI enhanced intent to remain, especially under conditions of high intragroup conflict—they argue that this effect results from the trusting bond with the leader being more important when there is less of an emotional bond among the staff. A similar substitution logic was applied by Andrews et al.

(2015), who surveyed 280 full-time employees and found that leader BI reduced job tension but that it becomes less necessary when there is high procedural justice, which they term a substitute for leadership. Boğan & Dedeoglu (2017) surveyed 290 hotel employees at 10 Turkish hotels and found that employee tenure moderates the impact of leader BI on trust, presumably because more senior employees have access to more information about leader trustworthiness.

A final set of moderated BI consequences entails the role of leader BI in counteracting negative forces. Kacmar & Tucker (2016) surveyed 133 foresters in the Southern United States and found that perceptions of leader BI attenuated the impact of employee regulatory focus on impression management tactics—it enabled followers to focus on getting their job done rather than on shaping their bosses' perceptions. Erkutlu & Chafra (2016a,b; 2017) first studied 1,003 faculty and their deans at 13 Turkish universities and found that deans' self-reported narcissism and psychological distance was associated with faculty experience of workplace ostracism, but that faculty perceptions of deans' BI attenuated this effect. In two surveys of 969 and 1,613 employees at 19 Turkish hotels, they found that leader narcissism, power distance, and organizational politics all reduced employee identification or embeddedness, but that leader BI interacts with these variables to attenuate or reverse their negative impacts. It appears that BI can attenuate negative impact of potentially destructive political climates and leadership styles. In other words, as long as they keep their promises, it is not quite so bad if your leader is a jerk.

### Behavioral Integrity Consequences: Summary

In sum, **Figure 1a**, has accrued support for all proposed links: BI appears to be associated with the effectiveness of program or policy implementation, employee retention, OCB, and performance—as well as voice and creativity. Many of these associations appear to apply at multiple levels of analysis, and the referent for BI—whether the construct describes an individual leader, a leadership group, a collective of teammates, or an organization writ large—makes a difference for which consequences are activated. As initially predicted, many of these consequences are mediated by trust, with evidence showing that it is specifically cognitive trust that is at play (McAllister 1995). Several studies we reviewed provide evidence for an additional mediating pathway representing the clarity of communication or information provided by consistent rather than inconsistent messaging. A single study has suggested confirmation of the proposed accelerating loop for perceptual priming. Finally, the initial model did not consider moderated consequences for BI, but such moderation effects seem to be warranted by the ideas that the specific values espoused and enacted matter, some contexts or observers enhance or diminish the impact of BI, espoused change absent action undermines project implementation, organizational structures can substitute for leader deficiency, and BI can attenuate the negative impacts of leader and contextual deficiencies. These more recent proposed elaborations of the initial BI model received far more limited support and thus warrant additional refinement and confirmation.

## THE PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION PROCESS

As is appropriate for a relatively new construct, the initial decades of research focused on demonstrating that BI's consequences justify further research. Far less empirical research has been devoted to examining and validating the proposed perceptual antecedents to BI. **Figure 1b** proposes four moderators of the link between actual alignment or inconsistency and BI perceptions. They include (a) the employee's dependence on the manager, with the idea that heightened dependence causes heightened vigilance and internal attributions; (b) employee caring about the focal issue, as people seem more likely to notice inconsistency regarding cherished or personally relevant values; (c) managers' social accounts explaining breaches, as effective apologies seem likely to

reduce internal attributions for inconsistencies and thus BI trait ascriptions; and (d) chronic construct accessibility among employees, as observers who are vigilant to hypocrisy are more likely to notice it.

Effron et al. (2018) drew on multiple related streams of research to examine the causes and consequences of an especially important type of low BI. Hypocrisy, they argue, is a result of low BI coupled with the perceiver's judgment that the word-action gap in question was motivated by the actor's desire to capture unearned moral benefit. As such, hypocrisy elicits special antipathy in the form of moral condemnation, punitive sentiment, and mistrust. Although we agree that this form of low BI is especially prevalent, consequential, and vile, it does not encompass the entire BI phenomenon. Well-meaning incompetence or instinctive statements of support that lack follow-through do not quite warrant the hypocrisy label, although they shape trait attributions of leaders (BI) that in turn reduce others' reliance on their spoken or written words.

### **Perception and Interpretation: Employee Dependence/Caring**

In their examination of the perception and interpretation processes that determine how and when actual inconsistencies drive hypocrisy perceptions, Effron et al.'s (2018) evidence-based arguments can well inform our own inquiry. They proposed some perceptual factors that echo the initially proposed factors in **Figure 1**, and a few additional ones. They agreed with the notion of chronic construct accessibility as offered in Simons et al. (2007) as justification for Black employees' relatively harsher judgments of their managers' BI. They added, based on a single unpublished vignette study that presented advisor statements and behavior to graduate students, the idea that the espousal of benevolence makes a breach especially salient and worthy of condemnation. It seems plausible that both of these described phenomena represent the initially proposed idea of employee caring about the issue. The personal relevance and salience of an espoused issue seems very likely to trigger both enhanced employee vigilance and enhanced internal attributions for inconsistencies: The fairness of a supervisor is especially relevant and salient for members of a minority population who have frequently suffered unfair treatment, and the benevolence of an advisor is especially relevant and salient for a vulnerable graduate student.

### **Perception and Interpretation: Social Accounts/Apologies**

Effron et al. (2018) offered further evidence that actor admission of misalignment and their expression of regret and suffering due to it attenuated the vehemence of resulting attributions, and these may be considered as forms of social account as described in **Figure 1b**. Ayaburi & Treku (2020) surveyed 432 US Facebook users after a data breach and found that the persuasiveness of an apology affected perceptions of the company's BI, which in turn determined the effectiveness of trust repair. Tomlinson & Carnes (2015) did a vignette study with 141 student subjects who read a story of a recruiter missing an interview with the candidate. Consistent with tenets from classic attribution theory (Kelley 1967), they found that explanation of external constraints attenuated the negative BI attribution as a result of the breach, and further that observer recall of their own similar transgressions further reduced negative BI attributions. In sum, evidence suggests that acknowledgments of misalignment, expressions of regret, and presentation of plausible explanations for gaps can reduce the translation from perceived gap to low behavioral integrity.

### **Perception and Interpretation: Motivated Reasoning**

A perceptual filter that was not initially considered is Effron et al.'s (2018) introduction of motivated reasoning in the interpretation of behavioral inconsistency as indicative of hypocrisy.

They cite Westen et al. (2006), who found political partisans were far more likely to detect hypocrisy in political statements attributed to their opponents compared to their allies. Barden et al. (2014) found similar results in a laboratory study with 188 male students, noting that subjects far more readily attributed hypocrisy in response to manipulated word-action mismatch by political opponents than allies, and this difference was especially pronounced where potentially mitigating factors were presented. Cha et al.'s (2020) combined set of lab and field studies of mega-churches, comprising 786 observations of 262 subjects, demonstrated that observers who experienced value congruence with a target resisted downgrading the targets' BI in response to disconfirming evidence, until they reached a tipping point after which a violent backlash occurs. Effron et al. argue that motivated reasoning is especially impactful on hypocrisy judgments where the data constituting word-action mismatch are ambiguous or vague. These results echo established findings in social psychology, which suggest that people are more likely to make internal attributions for negative behavior on the part of outgroup members compared to ingroup members for whom they are more likely to explain away negative behavior by attaching external attributions for it (Hewstone 1990, Pettigrew 1979).

### **Perception and Interpretation: Sequencing**

As demonstrated by multiple studies cited by Effron et al. (2018), people seem to be more repelled by words followed by incongruent actions than the other way around. This difference, which may focus on the hypocrisy motivation attribution rather than the broader BI attribution, appears to be driven by the notion that actions followed by incongruent words can still drive a redemption narrative, which is favored within some religious orientations. Espousal followed by incongruent behavior offers no such justifying narrative.

### **Perception and Interpretation: Cultural Context**

Friedman et al. (2018) did a cross-cultural series of vignette experiments that presented to respondents a story of requesting help from someone who agreed and then failed to appear, and then asked their judgments of the target's BI. The experimenters varied whether the target was a boss or subordinate. They presented such scenarios to populations from the United States, India, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. The effect sizes were bigger in the United States than in other countries, although they were still significant in other countries. Furthermore, power distance appeared to suppress Eastern respondents' negative BI attributions for bosses, but not for subordinates. Friedman et al. argued this broad difference between Eastern and Western respondents is likely due to differences in the context dependence of communications. Effron et al. agree with this interpretation, arguing that Western cultures tend to take words more literally than do Eastern cultures. Choi & Nisbett (2000), in a series of laboratory experiments, found that Korean observers displayed less surprise when behaviors violated expectations and, by inference, are less likely to ascribe traits to targets based on a single episode of unmet expectations. There are numerous possible cultural explanations for this finding. One is the difference between tight versus loose cultures, which differ in the extent to which situational constraints or norms (i.e., strong situations) versus internal volition, respectively, dictate behaviors (Gelfand et al. 2006, 2011). Another is the greater tendency for relational constraints to influence behavior in collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Consistent with this, Effron et al. (2018) argue that Eastern and Western cultures differ in their notion of an independent versus an interdependent concept of self, and that this difference may influence the relative importance of

behaving in accordance with one's own words versus behaving in accordance with other parties' expectations; in other words, in collectivistic cultures, perceivers are more likely to take into account the relational determinants of a target's behavior, thereby making it less likely that they immediately attribute observed behaviors to the internal traits of the actor. This argument would also be supported by Martin et al. (2013), who asked 189 managers from different cultures to define integrity. Although they found commonality across answers, they also found clear evidence that different aspects of integrity are emphasized in different cultures.

### Perception and Interpretation: Sex of Observer

Gatling et al. (2020) detected another provocative perceptual factor in BI judgment in a vignette study of 257 restaurant supervisors. The vignette materials manipulated a restaurant manager's actual word-deed alignment regarding the keeping of appointments and focus on customer satisfaction. They found that female respondents responded to the manipulation by adjusting their assessment of the target's BI upward or downward substantially more than did male respondents. Examining the experimental materials shows that the sympathetic actor in the story is a female supervisor under a male manager, and thus it is possible that subjects are more responsive to a story about someone with whom they identify. Still, it is provocative to consider that female observers might process BI breaches differently than do male observers.

### Perception and Interpretation: Summary

The notion of perceptual filters between actual misalignment and BI (a perception) seems promising for both research and practical management and has received initial support in a variety of directions. The initially proposed model in 2002 suggested that observer dependence on the target, their caring about the focal issue, the presence and nature of apologies, and chronic focus on hypocrisy/integrity would affect whether a breach was perceived and processed as an indicator of target BI. Thus far, employee caring and leader apologies have been supported by empirical data. The observer's relationship to the particular values espoused and enacted, and, by extension, the specific promises kept or broken, seems to play an important role: Observers are likely vigilant and mindful about values that affect them personally, and about which they care. Thus, one might expect observers from historically disadvantaged groups, such as racial minorities and women, to more readily detect hypocrisies regarding those issues (Mor Barak et al. 2021). Similarly, the benevolence of those who hold power is of practical importance to less powerful actors, who are especially likely to notice when espoused benevolence is not practiced. Apologies, acknowledgment, and contrition seem to make a difference, especially in mitigating hypocrisy attributions.

Although not noted in the initial BI theory model, cultural context plays a major role and seems to change effect sizes—however, it is also true that BI has been shown to have significant consequences in a wide variety of cultures. Effron et al.'s (2018) addition of motivated reasoning to the list of perceptual factors makes a lot of sense given the ambiguity of much of the data and the ubiquity of ingroup and outgroup identities. Finally, the possibility that gender might affect the perception process should be examined further.

## BEHAVIORAL ANTECEDENTS

Although it is almost entirely unstudied, the antecedents of behaviors that are assessed as part of word-action alignment (described in **Figure 1c**) are of critical practical importance for



anticipating and managing potential alignment problems that could in time lead to widespread employee cynicism and disaffection. **Figure 1c** suggests word-action divergence is promoted by structural factors that influence behaviors, like the need to satisfy diverse constituencies, partial or poorly integrated implementation of managerial fashions, organizational change efforts, and individual factors like leaders' awareness of their own values and their personality traits. Of these antecedents of behavior, only personality has been systematically studied. Several other behavioral antecedents have received anecdotal support, and a few new ones have been proposed and tested.

### **Behavioral Antecedents: Personality**

Marcus et al. (2016) administered a battery of personality surveys to 176 Dutch military police trainees who were then rated by their supervisors for BI. They found that Hexaco scores for conscientiousness and for honesty/humility were associated with trainees' supervisor rated BI. This association replicates earlier unpublished research by Palanski and Carroll as reported by Simons et al. (2012). It makes sense that personality attributes that focus on follow-through and honesty should reduce the generation of broken promises and inconsistent behavior.

### **Behavioral Antecedents: Leadership Style**

Gatling et al. (2017) surveyed 149 students in 24 teams at a US university and found support for a model that considered relational transparency as an antecedent to BI, which in turn drove trust and reduced deviance behavior. Gab Allah & Allah Nassar (2021) surveyed 320 staff nurses and 64 nurse managers at an Egyptian university hospital and found support for a model that suggested authentic leadership as an antecedent to BI, which in turn predicted nurse organizational commitment and work engagement. Leadership styles may constructively be considered as antecedents to behavioral integrity. It is also reasonable to consider behavioral integrity as a moderator of the impact of the leadership style.

### **Behavioral Antecedents: The Dissociation Loop**

Simons' 2002 model included an accelerating loop at the point of actual word-deed alignment that was termed managerial dissociation. Simons argued that a manager who, for whatever reason, exhibited a pattern of disconnected words and actions would be motivated to preserve a positive and consistent self-concept and thus would minimize awareness of his own inconsistencies—as such increasing the likelihood of further behavioral inconsistency. Although this proposed accelerating loop has not been systematically studied specifically regarding BI, a substantial literature discusses moral disengagement as a tool for preservation of self-concept given wrongdoing (Bandura 2002). This literature can fruitfully inform exploration of this proposed accelerating loop.

### **Behavioral Antecedents: New Discoveries**

Frieder & Basik (2017) found, in a survey of 157 enlisted US military cadets, that leaders' political skill, conceptualized as their ability to anticipate and manage others' responses to their behavior, predicts BI. It is unclear whether political ability in this case reduces leader generation of inconsistency or merely enables the leader to frame that inconsistency in a way that reduces followers' negative attributions. Erkutlu (2016) surveyed 593 faculty at 7 public Korean universities and found that deans' political skill interacted with their BI to attenuate the impact of low BI on

faculty burnout. Cha & Edmondson (2006) have also highlighted the importance of careful and tactical communication. In their qualitative study, they highlighted how people attribute hypocrisy to leaders for unintended breaches. This attribution suggests managing BI perceptions requires attention to both intended and unintended signals, particularly those related to issues that are valued by, or personally relevant for, observers. That means effective leaders need to be mindful not only of what they actually say and do with regard to an issue but also of how they are seen and the impact of context on perception.

Way et al. (2018) found in their study of 78 sets of Chinese hotel middle managers, their reports, and superiors that middle manager experience of organizational support (perceived organizational support) caused them to behave in ways their subordinates experienced as higher BI. This result suggests that sound and supportive managerial practice trickles down through the organization and may simply be a reflection of the well-documented BI trickle-down phenomenon.

In their study of 1,944 hotel employees reporting to 44 different managers, Simons et al. (2007) found evidence of a specific version of trickle-down in that middle manager BI assessments of their organizational superiors were highly associated with subordinate perceptions of the BI of those managers. Palanski & Yammarino (2011) replicated these results in their own study of 149 students in 36 teams, and Peng & Wei (2018) replicated it again in a sample of 716 Chinese employees and their 237 managers: Both studies again found that follower BI was driven by leader BI. From these studies, it seems safe to infer that high or low BI among managers in an organization can, through emulation, become part of a managerial climate in that it shapes followers' understandings of the behaviors that are expected of them.

Effron et al. (2018), in describing the origins of hypocrisy, point out a powerful driver of word-action mismatches that, in retrospect, seems like low hanging fruit: It is far easier to attempt to seem virtuous than it is to actually be so. This relative facility applies to the espousal and implementation of efforts to more fairly address diversity issues, manage participatively, truly care about employees' well-being or work-life balance, address environmental concerns, and enact a host of other socially desirable leadership initiatives. Effron et al. point out that many managers endeavor to reap the benefits of appearing moral while also capturing the benefits of self-interested pragmatic behavior. They also describe the positive benefits of "lip service" or feigned compliance with policies generated by organizational or regulatory superiors. Furthermore, they note that leadership utterances can sometimes be aspirational and thus inspirational rather than representing accomplished facts. It seems likely that many managerial inconsistencies, especially those that fall within the hypocrisy realm, may be driven by the rational self-interested behavior that Effron et al. highlight. To the extent such rational decision making plays this role, we might see it especially practiced by actors high in Machiavellianism or sociopathy and low in moral identity.

### **Behavioral Antecedents: Summary**

In sum, examination of the behavioral antecedents of BI is in its infancy. The manager personality traits of conscientiousness and honesty/humility appear to be predictive, and these might be useful in the managerial selection process. The finding that BI trickles down, or that managers emulate the BI level they see in their superiors, has been found in three distinct samples of managers and is likely to represent a real dynamic that amplifies the impact of executive conduct. Frieder & Basik's (2017) notion of political skill as antecedent to BI suggests the practical implication that managers can enhance BI through training in political skill, emotional intelligence, or BI itself. The phenomenon of moral disengagement needs to be applied and empirically studied as a potential accelerator of some managers' poor word-action alignment.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR BEHAVIORAL INTEGRITY RESEARCH

Our review of the BI literature in light of the conceptual model originally proposed in 2002 has several implications for future research on the construct:

1. BI has demonstrated strong and significant attitudinal, behavioral, performance, and implementation consequences across a wide variety of industries, levels of analysis, and cultural contexts. The magnitude and breadth of these consequences justify striving to better understand BI.
2. What remains uncertain is the exact mediating mechanisms by which these consequences happen: We currently believe it is some combination of cognitive trust and communication clarity, but studies have been idiosyncratic in identifying mediators.
3. The phenomenon of moderated consequences, which describes several potential and promising mechanisms of impact, was not included in the 2002 model but has been found in several research studies. Of particular importance is the notion that several types of organizational initiatives succeed or fail based largely on the BI of leadership, both individually and collectively. Relevant research suggests that attributes of the context or of the observer can make BI more or less consequential. Finally, some studies have suggested that BI might attenuate the negative impact of structural or leadership problems.
4. Perceptual antecedents of BI judgments and behavioral antecedents of actual word-action inconsistencies have both received relatively scant attention. Although this variation in scholarly attention across elements of the proposed model makes sense given that the initial task of scholarship was to demonstrate that the BI construct has consequence, a better understanding of the processes that precede BI judgments and the behaviors on which they are based is necessary for elucidating and enhancing the effective management of BI.

In addition to the above, we propose three additional directions for further research, which will be developed further here. Our first proposed direction is the development of multilevel models of BI. The micro- and macro work on BI has developed relatively independently, with few papers considering how value signals across levels interact in forming perceptions of BI, and how different foci of BI (e.g., leader and organization) combine to influence follower behavior. This independence is unfortunate as operational and strategic decisions work in concert to direct follower behavior. A few studies simultaneously measured and tracked different consequences for the BI of one's immediate manager and of the organization, or of its senior management (e.g., Ete et al. 2021, Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence 2012). Furthermore, we have found strong evidence that leaders tend to emulate the level of BI they perceive in their organizational superiors. More broadly, we expect that the effects of value signals at one level will always be contextualized by value signals at other levels. In other words, leadership is a multilevel phenomenon, with behaviors of followers influenced by leadership at different levels. However, as Batistic et al. (2017) demonstrate, there is a dearth of empirical research that adopts a truly multilevel perspective of leadership. We encourage future research to follow this advice and look at how issues of value misalignment and BI across levels of analysis influence follower behavior.

A second direction emerges from consideration of the observation that leaders are often held to account for commitments they never voiced. Effron et al. (2015) found in a series of four vignette studies that executives who violate principles publicly espoused by their companies are deemed to be hypocrites worthy of punishment or deprivation, even if they themselves did not participate in the espousal. These results were echoed in the study by Cha & Edmondson (2006), and together suggest that leaders are seen not just as personal actors themselves but also as representatives of the broader organization. Similarly, psychological contracts, defined by Robinson (1996) as

employees' subjective beliefs about the employment agreement, may have little to do with the company's or executives' explicit communications. However, both lab and field studies show their violation clearly triggers BI ascriptions (Vogelgesang et al. 2021). Simons (2008) and Cha & Edmondson (2006) both argued based on qualitative data that observers downgrade BI when they believe a promise has been broken, even when their belief is based on a misunderstanding or a miscommunication. Finally, unpublished vignette research by two of the authors found that students revised their BI assessments upward or downward when an advisor demonstrated or failed to demonstrate benevolence, even when the advisor made no such commitment—although the effect was, of course, stronger when the advisor did promise benevolence. If BI assessments are affected by the leader's enactment of values that she has not voiced, one wonders about the breadth of this phenomenon. Are leaders downgraded for BI when they fail to meet observer expectations, even where such expectations are driven by the observer's personal history, cultural prototypes, or broader organizational espousals? If this general pattern holds, it might account for challenges faced by female and minority leaders who are seen as role incongruent (Eagly & Karau 2002) and for whom dominant organizational narratives and prototypes are less personally representative.

A third new direction similarly addresses the actual alignments and misalignments that drive BI perception. Although the BI construct initially focused on the alignment of a leader's words and deeds (Simons 2002), the distinction between words and deeds breaks down under close consideration: (a) Actions that are interpreted by a motivated observer often communicate an underlying value and thus have symbolic power similar to words; and (b) an actor's words are also actions to the extent that they are spoken for a reason and thus represent behavioral choices. As such, we must consider alignment not just between words and deeds but also between words and words and between actions and actions. These additional considerations become especially important in assessing middle managers, whose capacity for espousal may be limited, and in considering the consistency of aggregate entities. For example, in assessments of the messages communicated by an organization's HR practices, Bowen & Ostroff (2004) argue that employees focus on the consistency of messages across practices as well as consistency in the way that they are enacted by managers. Similarly, Bromley & Powell (2012) conceptualize BI as behavioral consistency, as have seminal trust scholars such as Mishra & Mishra (2013), who have examined behavioral consistency as being core to trust. We must appreciate, however, that forms of consistency and inconsistency other than consistency between words and actions may elicit different attribution processes. Inconsistent communication or behavior, for example, is less likely to trigger hypocrisy attributions than is espousal followed by poor enactment. However, any of these inconsistencies would likely diminish the leader's credibility, at least with regard to the principles or values espoused or implied. Observers may be more forgiving of action-action misalignment than word-action misalignment because they ascribe lower intentionality to the former, are uncertain of the values implied by different actions, or attribute variation in behavior to differences in contexts (i.e., situational constraints on behavior).

One of the challenges of making scientific progress in the exploration of any new construct is managing the boundaries of that construct to include some phenomena and not others. Many, including the first author of this article, have casually in conversation or writing used the term BI to describe the fact of word-action alignment rather than the perception of it, which is what BI is. Similarly, some of the new directions that we propose present a risk of muddying the definition of BI. We have proposed broadening exploration of the antecedents of BI to include not only word-action alignment but also word-word and action-action alignment. Furthermore, we suggested that alignment between the actor's behavior and the observer's expectations or assumptions likely also drives BI perceptions. If, in fact, these directions prove to be fruitful for scholarship, they have implications for the definition of the construct itself. It seems important in integrating those

ideas that the BI construct definition retain focus on the notion that BI is a subjectively ascribed trait based on the perceived pattern of alignment among behaviors and words: Promise-keeping and enactment-espousal match. This subjectively ascribed trait probably still seems from a lay perspective like word-action alignment, answering the question, “how good is your word?”—even though our understanding of the antecedents has broadened from that initial basis.

## SUMMARY

Although leaders have long been admonished to “walk their talk,” “practice what they preach,” and “live by their word,” the systematic study of the consequences and antecedents of being seen to do so began a mere 20 years ago with the introduction of the BI construct. A review of the literature since that time demonstrates profound consequences at the individual, group, and organizational levels, and thus strongly affirms the need for further study. Mechanisms through which BI impacts consequences need to be better understood and replicated such that they are not quite so idiosyncratic to each study. The possibilities for moderated impact, which describe the role of BI as a necessary element of any effective leadership initiative, and, perhaps, as a way to mitigate the negative impacts of leader personality or negative organizational contexts, seem endless. Research into the conditions that drive behavioral consistency or inconsistency and of the perception and interpretation processes that play a critical role in the BI construct are both still in their infancies. This relative paucity of research, although understandable given the novelty of the BI research stream, is troubling given the importance of understanding these antecedent processes for the management of BI and credibility.

In addition to the new research directions directly suggested by considering the published research alongside the model of antecedents and consequences that Simons (2002) proposed in his construct-defining paper, we offer a few more. Very few studies have articulated and considered the cross-level implications of BI beyond the serially demonstrated trickle-down phenomenon. Since all organizational actions occur within a larger context, and since BI applies to so many different referents, we judge that a comprehensive model of cross-level BI and leadership would be useful and that such expanded models integrate growing research on HR system strength (Bowen & Ostroff 2004, Wright & Nishii 2013), the decoupling of espoused policies versus enacted practices (Nishii et al. 2018), the role of managers as meaning makers of organizational practices (Nishii & Paluch 2018), and the attributions that employees make about the underlying motivations of HR practices based on the way they experience those practices in their day-to-day work lives (Nishii et al. 2008). Furthermore, the BI construct itself might need to be expanded. There is evidence that BI judgments are affected by observer misapprehensions, assumptions or expectations, and a better understanding of such impact could well elucidate the challenges of cross-cultural management and of the effective inclusion of underrepresented minorities in leadership. Finally, there is evidence that the distinction between words and actions breaks down under closer scrutiny: Leaders usually speak in order to accomplish a specific purpose, and so utterances constitute actions, and motivated observers interpret leader actions for their symbolic implications, which make them resemble words. Thus, the BI construct might need to be broadened to include the alignment among words and among actions and not just between the two.

While all of Simons’ (2002) initially proposed construct consequences have been borne out by subsequent empirical research, there is much yet to be learned about BI. We agree with Effron et al. (2018) that BI needs to be thoughtfully managed rather than automatically maximized, as values occasionally conflict and circumstances change. A better understanding of the conditions that give rise to behavioral inconsistency and the factors that affect the interpretation of that

inconsistency is imperative to empower managers to make wise choices that maximize their credibility and their ability to affect change and to drive performance.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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